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ABSTRACT

A survey of 71 elementary school and 39 middle school principals in Bronx County, New York, was designed to compare their knowledge and attitudes regarding placement of handicapped children in the most appropriate least restrictive environment and to examine the effects of experience and background on their knowledge and attitudes. The principals were administered the Rucker-Gable Educational Programing Scale. Conclusions were: (1) that both the elementary and middle school principals were severely lacking in knowledge toward the educational placement of handicapped children; (2) that principals tended toward programing for mildly handicapped children in more restrictive educational environments than did the experts; (3) that years of experience as a principal had no statistically significant effect on knowledge or attitudes; and (4) that for both elementary and middle school principals, having special education classes housed in their school buildings had no significant effect on knowledge and attitudes. Among recommendations was the development of inservice training programs for principals focusing on appropriate placement of handicapped children in the least restrictive environment. (SW)

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ABSTRACT OF PRESENTATION BY DR. JOHN REEHILL, NEW YORK CITY BOARD OF EDUCATION, DIVISION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION ON APRIL 15, 1982, AT THE COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN IN HOUSTON, TEXAS

KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES OF BRONX COUNTY NEW YORK PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS WITH REGARD TO THE PLACEMENT OF CHILDREN IN THE LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Mainstreaming and alternative educational programming for children with handicapping conditions has been a serious concern of educators for many years. Recently, federal legislation has mandated that, to the greatest extent appropriate, children with handicapping conditions be educated with children who are not handicapped. The degree to which the special needs of children with handicapping conditions are accommodated within the regular educational environment and successful alternative educational programming is provided will depend largely upon the attitudes of regular school administrators towards such educational programming as well as their knowledge of appropriate educational placements.

The purpose of this study was to determine and compare the knowledge and attitudes of public school elementary and middle school principals in the Bronx County of New

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York State with regard to the placement of handicapped children in the most appropriate least restrictive environment. This study sought to determine and compare the knowledge and attitudes of subgroups of these elementary and middle school principals categorized according to their experience with special education classes in their schools and background as school administrators.

Knowledge and attitudes of the principals were measured by the Rucker-Gable Educational Programming Scale (RGEPS). The scale consists of brief behavioral vignettes of thirty children who were actually referred for education service, and a description of educational placement alternatives within public school settings on a seven-step continuum from placement in a regular classroom to placement in a residential or treatment center.

The completed scales were returned by seventy-one of the elementary public school principals and thirty-nine of the middle public school principals. The return rate was 65 percent of the total principal populations.

The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine any significant difference among elementary school principals, middle school principals, and the thirty-five experts used to norm the RGEPS regarding attitudes towards and knowledge of programming for handicapped children. Two-way analyses or variance were

used to determine any significant differences among the elementary school principals and the middle school principals based upon years of experience as administrators and the presence of special education classes housed in their school buildings. The Scheffe test of post hoc comparisons was used to determine significant differences in means between any two groups in instances where statistically significant F ratios were found among three variables.

Research hypotheses were formulated to help determine the extent to wnich the elementary principals and middle school principals had positive attitudes and knowledge of programming for handicapped children in the least restrictive environment. Results were:

1. Both the elementary and middle school principals had less knowledge than the experts towards the appropriate placement of handicapped children in the least restrictive environment. Moreover, there were no statistically significant differences in knowledge scores between the two groups of principals.
2. There were no statistically significant differences among the elementary principals, the middle school principals, and the experts in their attitudes towards the placement of handicapped children, except towards the mildly handicapped. Both groups of principals had lower attitude scores towards the mildly handicapped than the experts.

3. There were no statistically significant differences among elementary school principals' or middle school principals' knowledge and attitudes based upon the variables of exposure to special education classes in their schools or years of experience as principals.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Both the Bronx public school elementary and middle school principals differed significantly in their placement scores with respect to knowledge towards educational programming for handicapped children as compared to the thirty-five experts. If the validity of the mean placement scores of the experts with respect to knowledge is accepted, then the conclusion is that the Bronx principals are severely lacking in knowledge towards the educational placement of handicapped children. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the elementary school principals and the middle school principals are a homogeneous group insofar as their knowledge of educational placement of handicapped children is concerned, since these two groups did not differ in their mean placement scores. The indication is that the Bronx principals would benefit from pre-service or in-service training in appropriate placement of handicapped children in the least restrictive environment. In the design of

pre-service or in-service training, it would be necessary to analyze the specific, individual placements that the principals selected.

Because of the wide, uniform, and absolute directional discrepancy of these sample Bronx principals with the mean knowledge scores of the experts, future studies should investigate the validity of the experts' placements used to norm the RGEPS in 1972. With the mandates of current legislation such as P.L. 94-142, the original validation may no longer be viable with current trends and practices towards appropriate placement of handicapped children. It is suggested the RGEPS be renormed with another group of experts; larger than the original thirty-five and representing a wider divergence of academic disciplines associated with the identification, evaluation, placement, and remediation of handicapped children.

2. Both the Bronx elementary and middle school principals did not differ from the experts in their attitudes towards the placement of handicapped children in the least restrictive environment, except towards the mildly handicapped. The Bronx principals' statistically significant placement scores towards mildly handicapped children, as compared to the experts, indicated a trend towards programming for

mildly handicapped children in more restrictive educational environments. This tendency on the part of the principals resulted in a greater emphasis upon the use of resource room programs.

3. For both the elementary school and middle school principals, years of experience as a principal had no statistically significant effect upon knowledge or attitudes towards handicapped children as measured by the RGEPS.
4. For both the elementary school and middle school principals, having special education classes housed in their school buildings had no statistically significant effect upon knowledge of or attitudes towards handicapped children as measured by the RGEPS

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is suggested that inservice training programs focusing on appropriate placement of handicapped children in the least restrictive environment should be developed and implemented for elementary school and middle school principals.
2. Colleges and universities offering programs leading to certification as School District Administrator should institute appropriate training to offset the deficiencies in knowledge reported in this study. Either separate courses concerning placement of

handicapped children in the least restrictive environment should be offered, or a significant number of course hours within ongoing standard courses should be devoted to the topic.

3. The State Education Department should consider mandating for School Administrator certification evidence of training for administrators and supervisors concerning proper placement of handicapped children.
4. Although this study included only Bronx principals, it is reasonable to expect principals nationwide are experiencing similar problems. Replication of this study in other school systems would be informative and helpful to school administrators responsible or concerned with special education programs.
5. The RGEPS should be renormed to reflect changing attitudes and knowledge towards alternative programming and placement of handicapped children in light of recent legislation such as P.L. 94-142.
6. Other factors such as class size, teacher morale, and building climate should be examined concerning their relationship to the placement of pupils in the least restrictive environment.

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